

What sort of help is that? problematic support for sole mothers returning to study

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This paper is set in the context of contemporary changes to Australian welfare provision and the demand for citizens to take an increasingly proactive role in their transition from welfare dependency to work. Similar patterns of welfare reform are emerging in a number of countries, including UK, Canada and USA. Compulsory participation in education and training programs, or in the labour market, is central to these reform processes. Participation is a prerequisite to continued welfare support, with financial penalties imposed for non-compliance. The broad argument supporting reform is driven by the claim that many welfare recipients need stronger encouragement to contribute to the wider community which supports them.

This paper explores findings from a study involving five welfare dependent sole mothers in Adelaide, South Australia. The purpose of the study was to explore the women's experiences of, and responses to, the participation requirements of welfare reform.

I begin by introducing the Australian context of welfare reform. I present a number of factors that impact on the everyday life of many welfare dependent sole mothers and affect their ability to successfully engage in education and training programs. I draw on Mechthild Hart's theorisation of *motherwork* to explore these issues from a different standpoint. A brief description of the methodology is followed by major findings from the study and a discussion of these findings. I conclude with some implications for educators and educational provision.

Sole mothers in Australia

In 2001 the Australian Government introduced a welfare reform package which embraces the concept of Mutual Obligation. Mutual Obligation as defined by the current government proposes 'that it is fair and reasonable to require those in receipt of support from the community to put something back into that community' (Liberals 1998). Put simply, welfare recipients must earn their benefits. Non-compliance with requirements such as missing an interview or failing to reply to a letter will result in penalties including withdrawal of payment. A single parent family may be penalised a sum exceeding four weeks' income.

Sole mothers who receive financial assistance have, since September 2002, been subject to these requirements. The architects of Mutual Obligation claim that it provides a pathway out of poverty for sole mothers, who are amongst the most financially disadvantaged in Australia: welfare reform via education and training is promoted as 'a gateway to self-reliance rather than a dead-end with no future' (Newman 1999).

Despite these claims, there are many reasons why women may find it difficult to enter and successfully remain in study programs. Joyce Stalker (2001) claims that entrenched misogynistic attitudes still operate within and outside learning environments. Describing a social framework in which a woman's relevance is still defined in terms of her usefulness to men, rather than to her own needs and values, Stalker revisits the difficulties women have in participating in educational activities, with a timely reminder that strategies which seek to identify and remove the source of difficulty are often simplistic and ineffective.

Researchers such as Horsman (2000) and McInnes (2001) describe the ongoing effects of domestic violence and poor health. Many women, having suffered abuse or neglect due to lack of support or the constraints of poverty, have health issues which affect their ability to take on additional activities. Domestic violence affects women throughout society, and is by no means an issue only for lower socio-economic groups. However, domestic violence and the long term physical and emotional damage that women carry from such abuse features strongly in the

literature on poor women and sole mothers. A recent Australian study by Elspeth McInnes (2001) concluded that gendered violence is inextricably linked to women's poverty and exclusion. Poverty is an overarching fact of life for sole mothers on welfare and is a major barrier to participation.

An enquiry into poverty in Australia over 25 years ago recognised that

An adequate income is fundamental to a person's security, well-being and independence. It allows freedom of choice and freedom to participate in activities of choice. It contributes greatly to personal freedom and the extent of opportunities available (in Saunders 1998).

A woman with two school-aged children will receive \$A435.20 per fortnight (this is \$US258, \$Can379, €239 or £165, which is only slightly more than the fee for one day's attendance at this conference). With this income she pays mortgage or rent, car running costs, and household expenses such as gas, electricity, telephone and repairs. She is expected to provide adequate food and clothing, pay school expenses for her children, maintain sole responsibility for her children's well-being, and take care of the housework and household and garden maintenance. She may do this every day without a break. If she is unable to be at home, her children may be left unsupervised, and meals not prepared. She may have little opportunity to share the company of other adults. On this benefit she cannot afford childcare, or the cost of socialising: restaurant meals are beyond her means, and even one coffee can break the budget. She is unlikely to ever take a holiday. This lack of disposable income restricts her recreational opportunities, and her ability to successfully undertake study. Lack of support networks, physical and mental exhaustion, and a need to 'be there' for the daily crises that are part of family life, are all factors which influence a sole mother's ability to engage in activities which are part of a broader social framework within which society expects all its members to participate.

Motherwork

Into this profile of social disadvantage, I want to introduce the idea of mothering as an educational concept. Mechthild Hart (1992) describes mothering as an intensely productive activity, which touches all areas of human experience and development. The experience of being a mother, which she calls motherwork, is a pedagogical practice in which exchanges of information and knowledge occur between mother and child. Mothering exists within the physical and spiritual aspects of a woman's daily life, and can profoundly influence her thoughts and actions. It becomes part of the lived experience of a woman, for she cannot become 'not a mother' even when she is not with her child, nor attending to the child's needs. According to Hart, motherwork is an educational process which keeps 'the bond between work, knowledge and experience intact' (page 183). Similarly, Carmen Luke (1996) talks of the 'pedagogies of everyday life'. Michael Welton (1995:134) claims that '[a]ll of society is a vast school'. It is true that even as adults, much of our learning takes place outside formal institutions. These concepts of informal learning and community education have gained a measure of acceptability and validity alongside training and academic scholarship. Taken a step further, as Welton suggests, if we view society and all its facets as a vast source from which, and within which, we learn, a theory of social learning emerges. From this perspective, aspects of everyday living are educational experiences. Hart (1992:183) recognises the educational concepts of 'competence, ability, skills, knowledge and ways of knowing' embedded in motherwork. She describes its educative nature thus: 'the raising of children ... provides numerous parallels for an educational process which is likewise life-oriented', keeping 'the bond between work, knowledge and experience intact'.

I have set this notion of motherwork within the model of participation requirements and disadvantage to provide a framework for my research, which I undertook as a study of women's experiences within the context of dominance relations. Welfare reform is concerned with a construction of values in which the dominant ideology sets the agenda. In doing so, it silences other points of view.

Methodology

The study drew on feminist poststructuralism as it resonated with my concern to offer more comprehensive ways of understanding relations between women, work and study. My aim was to explore understandings of these relations within the context of compulsory participation, from the perspective of those at the centre of welfare reform imperatives, and to present their own experiences, in their own words.

The project was a study of five sole mothers, ranging in age from late 20s to mid 50s, and living in Adelaide, South Australia. Two had university degrees, whilst others had completed, or had at some time attempted to complete, various academic or training programmes. The women were all welfare reliant, and facing the requirements of Mutual Obligation.

Data were collected from focus group meetings and individual interviews in the period May to August 2002, leading up to the inclusion of sole parents in Mutual Obligation imperatives. Focus group discussion was prompted by open-ended questions about past and current experiences of participation and concerns about the new requirements of Mutual Obligation. The key themes identified were then pursued in interviews, with interviewees encouraged to respond at length, each interpreting her responses within the context of her current situation. From the collected data I identified a number of themes, some of which are discussed here: others are dealt with in a larger paper on which this is based (Daniels 2003).

Findings

The responses of the women in this study indicate that they experience support and help in different ways, some of which may in fact lessen their opportunities and create further disadvantage.

The women were eager to take up opportunities which would improve their quality of life, and that of their children. Tertiary qualifications and skills training programs were considered fundamental to gaining employment that would provide an adequate income and the flexibility they needed to fulfil their parenting responsibilities. However, these women also took the role of mothering very seriously, reflected in one woman's claim that 'parenting is the most vital work in society'. Whilst they were acutely aware of the increasing stigma of being a sole mother *and* welfare recipient, they maintained that their parenting obligations would remain a priority, even when faced with compulsory participation requirements.

They described the difficulties they already faced in attempting to combine educational activities with the responsibilities of single parenting: the time constraints, the need for flexibility, of balancing the need to secure a future with the immediate needs of their children. 'I don't want to put 30% into study, 30% into work, 30% into parenting' was how one woman described her dilemma. They claimed that welfare reform strategies of advice and referral for childcare and other support services were ineffective. They were more concerned with the lack of practical support to enable them to take up their preferred options for education or training. They cited university lectures held at night and the inflexibility of educational providers and lecturers, the high fees of many training courses, and lack of affordable childcare. These issues, faced by many adult learners with children, command a higher degree of attention when that learner has no network of family or friends, no partner to 'step in' and no money to pay for help.

The women identified poverty as a major influencing factor in their capacity to engage in education or training. Welfare payments were so low these women were unable to afford the high cost of training courses, university fees and childcare. Living well below the poverty line often meant not being able to participate in events and activities that are taken for granted by people in adequately-paid employment, and greatly affected the lifestyle choices they could offer their children. One summarised it this way: 'a parent's role is to guide, to nurture, to protect, to

support, and all of that is not necessarily related to money. But it's a darned sight easier to do it if you're not looking for food at the same time'.

A troublesome relationship emerged as the women spoke of their experiences with Centrelink, the government agency responsible for welfare support, services and surveillance. Centrelink will also be responsible for administering Mutual Obligation measures. These sole mothers drew parallels between the methods of delivery used by this agency, and the domestic violence to which most of them had been subjected in previous relationships. The unexpected telephone calls and letters, and staff who, it seemed, were at liberty to talk down to them (and occasionally did), were mechanisms with which the government continued to exert control over them, 'continuing the cycle of abuse'. Some of the women spoke of the anxiety which accompanied their contact with Centrelink, and the physical and emotional responses: uncontrolled shaking or bursting into tears. Others explained how they behaved submissively to gain approval. They spoke of the struggle to maintain confidence and self-esteem: 'you don't feel as tho' you deserve to be supported' said one woman. Another complained: 'They want to know where you are, and who you're seeing'. One woman, answerable to a number of government authorities, spoke of them as her 'Five husbands. I have no support, and five husbands'. These women felt trapped in such a relationship, and all expressed a wish to get 'off welfare'. They felt frustration and anger at their inability to change their situation, finding themselves in a relationship which left them fearful and feeling disempowered and victimised.

Discussion

These findings from my study indicate that some sole mothers do want to participate in training and study options. However, an environment of enforced participation such as exists in Australia today is making it harder for them to successfully do so. There is a mismatch between the nature of support needed by some women, and that which is being offered in a welfare reform policy based on an assumption of universal accessibility to the choices and strategies of participation. Many of the government's strategies are inappropriate. They indicate a misunderstanding or lack of acknowledgement of problems such as the systemic effects of poverty and ongoing trauma from previous relationships, yet these issues play a part in constituting the materiality of life for many sole mothers.

Jenny Horsman's (2000) work with survivors of domestic violence shows that escape from the violence itself does not necessarily remove the trauma. She points to the need for educators to acknowledge the ongoing effects of that trauma as part of the experience that the student brings to the learning context. The barriers caused by entrenched poverty have also been shown to carry far beyond an immediate lack of material resources: the reduced quality of life resulting from the systemic effects of poverty severely affects the capacity of welfare dependent sole mothers to engage in education or training.

The concept of motherwork as a holistic educational vocation is clearly one which does not fit well into the economically driven discourse of current government ideology. Within this environment of welfare reform, sole mothers in Australia are faced with an additional dilemma of conflicting values. At the risk of neglecting what they claim is their most important job, they are told to participate in order to contribute to society: the motherwork which they consider so important is undervalued.

Sole mothers have identified ways in which they can be assisted, and claim that the government is ignoring them. They are threatened with withdrawal of an already meagre income for non-compliance. This is not a recipe for successful participation.

The many ways in which women create meaning from the context of their lives suggests that a range of actions is required to ensure support strategies for education and training can be matched by their ability to be taken up. In Australia, the current agenda of increased participation may not in fact lead to 'an increasingly diverse learner population': more likely, inappropriate strategies will further exclude those groups who already are socially and educationally disadvantaged.

Conclusion

This paper provides insights into a particular group of potential adult learners, and describes some of the issues which constitute their daily experience of life: experiences which invariably surface in learning environments. The findings suggest that participation for welfare-dependent sole mothers will require more than the seamless pathways laid out in the measures and strategies of welfare reform. Whilst I am sure all mothers would benefit from a social perspective informed by motherwork, this research suggests that one of the factors affecting participation is the lived experience of social disadvantage. Being a sole mother in this context compounds the difficulties. I believe this research has clear implications for educators. Given the push for full participation taking place within the process of welfare reform, we need to understand why some individuals do not participate, or do so unsuccessfully. Educational institutions must also look to a broader framework of educational provision, and a reassessment of narrowly defined concepts of education and learning. Theories of social learning which acknowledge informal learning *and* lived experience are needed to create inclusive learning environments. I believe such theories will benefit both learners and educators.

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